

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of *Uncertain Tastes: Memory, Ambivalence, and the Politics of Eating in Samburu, Northern Kenya* by Jon Holtzman

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Book details

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Review

This book unexpectedly frustrated me and at the same time delighted me which is not unlike what the author, Jon Holtzman, wants to convey about Samburu food, that is, its ambivalence and contradictions. The book is a compendium of several years of research in Samburu, and some of the materials have been taken from journal articles, reassembled into a book. Those interested in understanding more about pastoral diet intake and nutritional status will be disappointed however. This book is not about that, though there is a short mention to it in Chapters 2 and 9 (without references). Rather, this book is about the Samburu way of viewing their world as seen through food. We see broad cultural patterns and changes in those patterns through the mundane daily experience of food and eating. For those people who are food insecure, food is perhaps an excellent metaphor for life as Samburu becomes socialized into their culture of hunger. The book is thus about the cultural significance surrounding food and how people of various ages and gender socially manipulate its production (livestock and the superiority of a diet of milk, meat, and blood), its processing (raw versus cooked), its consumption (who consumes what types of food), and its changes. Food possesses values, practices, and social relations and reveals cultural changes, and Holtzman nicely navigates this realm of understanding.

I initially wanted to read about Samburu food, but it is not until Chapter 3 that the first vignette of eating practices is introduced. The first two chapters (Part 1) describe the rationale, framework, and theories that frame the descriptions of food, eating, and culture that follow. Part 1 is an exhaustive description of the notion of collective memory, that is, history as story described by individuals and social groups. A set of theories that contribute to the framework of collective memory such as those of Bourdieu and Geertz are detailed. Thus, this book is a story of how theory is developed and used to

explain food and how a story of food contributes to this theoretical understanding of culture.

Chapters 3 and 4 are ethnographic, where the framework developed in Chapters 1 and 2 is elucidated through examples. The Samburu notions of food are simple as there are only five main words to describe the taste of foods: sweet, sour, and negative words for foods that are considered “bad.” Where this is seemingly straightforward, how the age and gender system operates as reflected in food is extremely complex. Murranhood (the age grade of bachelor warriors), for example, is highly regulated as portrayed through food. At the time of bachelor warriorhood, which occurs between the ages of 15 to 20, young men are expected to remain distant from domestic life. They cannot eat food seen by women except for milk and can only eat with age mates. Murran must help any family that calls upon them, and all families are expected to contribute to feeding them. Women’s food on the other hand is considered “not food”; women basically get leftovers such as the buttermilk left after making ghee and maize meal a “grey” food. Men, in contrast, are regarded as deserving privileged food. The irony is that women are better off nutritionally than men and that there are many ways that women can deny men food as they are in control of the distribution of food within the household.

Eating the right food in the right company, sharing properly, and not displaying greed are core values embodied in eating (Chapter 4). Meat is masculine in Samburu and is the ideal food for murran, and eating it most often takes place away from women. Likewise, particular cuts of meat belong to specific age and gender groups. Milk on the other hand is a highly feminine resource to be distributed in various forms (fresh, soured, buttermilk, etc.) to the family. Fresh blood and blood mixed with milk is the food of men. Thus, it is through food that Samburu marks and lives various roles such as age, masculinity and femininity, respect, sharing, modernity, and tradition.

“Nkanyit,” a sense of respect, is a fundamental Samburu value and is reflected in the appropriate patterns of avoidance prescribed by the age and gender system (Chapter 5). However the essence of nkanyit is to not clearly and visibly wrong someone, which leaves the possibility of deceit and ambiguity. Thus, there is the constant tension between what is normative versus seeking to elude the norms. Thus, covertly starving one’s elderly father or husband by passively diverting food away from him occurs and is implicitly seen as reasonable. So while people agree to the principle, they do not necessarily agree to the outcome. The Samburu explicitly recognize the importance of duplicity, and it is a covert cultural value as people recognize that bravery, fidelity, and generosity are often not attainable or even desirable. For example, though there is the notion that “friendship is through the stomach” (page 132), food is often eaten secretly and in hiding, so that while one may appear generous and fair, the reality is different.

It is through food that we view how Samburu has experienced change (Part 3, Chapters 6 to 9). Milk-based foods and, even more so, meat maintain the social distance coupled to Samburu notions of respect (nkanyit) such as the murran eating away from women and home. Yet today, tea and maize meal, introduced in the 1930s or 1940s, are a common part of the diet. Tea, though a traditional luxury food of men with its essential sugar, is now becoming a “common” food because there is not enough milk for a rising human population, so it is diluted in tea for everyone. Thus, tea has moved from being a luxury to

something common like milk. Maize meal, considered a “gray” food, is consumed by everyone, including the murrar, as livestock populations have declined per capita. Both these foods have to be cooked, seen as a somewhat new thing. And cooking brings people together which, especially for murrar, is seen as bad and as a decline of Samburu culture. All Samburu also link these foods and new ways of eating to the drastic reduction in livestock holdings in the last decades.

Another example of change is beer brewing, whereby women benefit from the production and sale of “busaa” and “changaa,” alcoholic beverages made and sold by women. Busaa is considered a food as it is fermented from maize and millet. Changaa is a locally distilled liquor and thus has a much stronger alcohol content and is considered “bad.” The need to increasingly purchase food to feed the family puts women who have to rely on their husbands for cash at a disadvantage. Livestock are now a source of a new type of food, not just milk, meat, and blood, because they provide cash from the sale in the market to purchase food. Market integration has proven advantageous to women (who are near markets) who can sell milk, firewood, or beer. In this circumstance, women do not need to rely on their husbands for cash. Furthermore, because money is something new there are no ethics about it, and money offers a way to avoid sharing and generosity. Change as seen through food can be summed to “eating shillings” which now plays a central role in Samburu culture (page 248). Change is not viewed here as either good or bad, but rather ambivalent, as it varyingly affects individuals and age-gender groups in Samburu society.

In the end, the book demonstrates that food, like culture, is not a cohesive whole but rather an incoherent and ambivalent intersection of history, meanings, and practices. Samburu essentially experience their history and their social relationships through food. The information on food and its production, distribution, and consumption patterns are not new, but the cultural constructions of it are more nuanced and detailed than in other studies of pastoral food. Food here is explained through a certain set of postmodern theories, and at the same time, theories are further developed through Samburu experiencing food.

Overall, I like the book, but there is a certain amount of redundancy in the book that is not useful. Further, Samburu food is actually not discussed until about page 50. I grew impatient while getting to the issues of real food, but this is certainly reflective of my interests and biases. The book would be useful for classes in theory and in looking at food through a detailed cultural lens.

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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